

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 9

Nathalie Joachim and Carrie Mae Weems's *May Flowers*

National Gallery of Art

[GENTLE MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee.

Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint.

But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

Singer Nathalie Joachim talks about her home nation of Haiti as though it's a work of art. She says, "The light is different there than in the US, but in a way that's hard to describe for those who haven't basked in it. And the rhythms are different, too, from the rhythm of life in the tiny farming village to that of a Sunday church service."

Nathalie's research and her music are steeped in the rhythms of her island home. And those rhythms are in turn the result of hundreds of years of storytelling, mentorship, and cultural memory.

In particular, Nathalie's music has been shaped by Haitian women who passed their songs and styles down to the next generation. That kinship between women, regardless of age, is what drew her to the Carrie Mae Weems photograph *May Flowers*.

In this portrait from the early 2000s, three black girls are dressed in their May Day best, lounging on the grass and enjoying the sun. One of them is staring down the camera and the woman behind it. Weems saw herself in those girls. And, as Nathalie told us, she can't help but feel similarly.

NATHALIE JOACHIM: I was drawn to this piece of art maybe initially because I saw a little bit of myself in it—just this memory of the joy of being young with my sisters and my friends and that sort of capturing of moments of joy that sort of appears in my own memory, that sort of flashes of beautiful childhood memory.

And I also saw pieces of my own music in it, of course, this idea of young girls living in Haiti, many of whom were a part of my own project *Fanm d'Ayiti*. But this idea of seeing yourself in the next generation and hopefully being an example for them and in many ways, trying to recapture their joy in my adulthood.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So who are these girls? And how did they come to be subjects for one of the 20th century's most celebrated photographers? For more on Carrie Mae Weems and the girls in *May Flowers*, we turn to Andrea Nelson. She's an associate curator in the Gallery's department of photography.

This was a series of photographs that Weems took. Tell us about what was happening and how she came to capture these girls.

ANDREA NELSON: This work is part of a larger series that's titled *May Days Long Forgotten*. And that title comes from the last line of a poem that Carrie Mae Weems wrote for an earlier installation that she did called *Ritual and Revolution*. And I think with *May Days Long Forgotten*, she's continuing to think about this idea of revolution, but more in the terms of it being about the idea of possibility.

So it's a group of young girls that Weems met. She really was just in her town of Syracuse, New York, and was driving down the street and saw this young girl with her mother. And the young girl really reminded Weems of herself.

And as she recounts the story, she stopped the car. She got out. She introduced herself and really developed a relationship with this young girl and her mother and ended up photographing her and her sisters and her cousins. So these young girls are the subjects of the series.

[MUSIC]

(SINGING) Alleluia. Alleluia. I long to shout Alleluia.

CELESTE HEADLEE: The music that you've chosen is very joyful to me when I listen to it. And yet, these girls have very serious looks on their faces as they celebrate May Day in New York.

NATHALIE JOACHIM: Yeah. I mean, there is something comforting about the looks, though, to me. You know? I guess I don't see them so much as serious, but just knowing, having that sense of closeness.

I grew up with two sisters and a brother. And I feel like children are able to have this sort of sense of ease with one another. That's actually how I read it, more of a sense of comfort than something quite serious—although capturing, especially you see so many images of young people in Haiti that are captured that people sort of have as these iconic images in their mind. Sometimes a child can look at you in a way that you see so deeply into, maybe a sense of their past self or their future self, even. And so there's something quite comforting to me about that.

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

CELESTE HEADLEE: I want to hear more about this idea of generational music that led to the music we hear. You were doing research on female musicians in Haiti, as I understand. And you ended up speaking with some women who had been making music for decades and decades. And then you connected this with the voices of children. Tell me about the women musicians that you met with in Haiti.

NATHALIE JOACHIM: Yes. The whole album, actually the entire project, became centered around three female artists. The first was Toto Bissainthe, who actually, I never had a chance to meet. She passed away in the '90s.

But I got a chance to talk to her daughter pretty extensively about her life, which was amazing.

She was an actress and also a musician. And really cared so much for not just Haiti but for Black people.

She was an actress in one of the first Black theater troops in France, which was really amazing. And was not someone who would have considered herself an activist, but who very much cared about the well-being of people in Haiti and thought that it was important that her music tell our story in a proud way and empower the people of Haiti to recognize the strength in who we are.

The second artist was Emerante de Pradines, who I was lucky enough to meet at the age of 98, just before her passing, which was a true gift. And was maybe one of the last formal interviews that she gave in her life.

And the third artist is still living today. Her name is Carole Demesmin. And she is a Haitian vodou songstress and really is very connected to vodou as a practice and as a spiritual tradition and not in this sort of bastardized sense of vodou as we know it here in the United States.

But for us, vodou is a spiritual practice, a connection to nature, a connection to one another that goes back centuries. And she is a musician who really celebrates that and cherishes that piece of our history in a way that is really admirable and quite beautiful.

And so the three of them became the center of my album.

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

CELESTE HEADLEE: And how did you get the sounds of the children singing?

NATHALIE JOACHIM: It's a story I love telling but I'm not asked really all that often. But I was in Haiti on a research trip and had been there for quite some time, really traveling all across the country and collecting oral history and doing a lot of field recording and staying in conversation with Haitian people.

And I had a few days at home in my family's small, small, small farming village in Dantan, which is in the southern region of Haiti. And when I say small, I mean very, very small. It's barely a blip on the map. But it's home for us.

And my cousin was working with the children's choir at our church. There's nothing but a church and a school and farms in our village.

So my cousin had been working with the children's choir. She actually sings in the choir in church every Sunday. And she invited me to come to the church service to hear the work that she'd been doing.

And I'm not a regular churchgoer myself. And so I wasn't really sure that it would be all that related to my work. So I had been walking around with my field recorder for weeks and weeks.

And when I got ready to go to the church service, my dad turned to me and said, "Oh, are you not going to bring your recorder?" And I said, "I mean, for church? I'm not sure." And he said, "Well, you never know." And so I said, "Yeah, I guess, you're right. I don't have to use everything I record."

And so I arrived at the church early and kind of snuck up onto the altar and hid my field recorder there up on the altar. I'm sure I wasn't supposed to be up there.

And then as I turned around and looked back down into the church, it was just beautiful. It was the most beautiful Caribbean day. Anyone who's been to Haiti knows that, to me anyway, it seems the sun shines in quite a different way there than it does anywhere else.

And there was all of this beautiful light pouring into the church and all of these young girls who were singing in the chorus. And to this day, I'm not really sure where all the boys and men were. But that's something I can't explain.

But everybody had started pouring into the church, sort of gathering and organizing themselves from the front of the church, the youngest voices at the very front. And then row after row behind them filled in older generations of women all the way to the elders of our community.

And just the sight of that alone was something quite beautiful to me, to know that there was this sense of unspoken order and just everyone there sort of supporting each other in one way or another.

And I went and sat next to my cousins, which was not exactly in the correct age order. But I sat there nonetheless.

And I guess it just hadn't occurred to me that it would be such a spiritual experience. As I mentioned, I'm not a churchgoer normally. And I very much had this idea of a Catholic mass in my mind. Especially as a classical musician, the idea of a mass comes with such a clear pedagogical or educational or—

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, very formalized.

NATHALIE JOACHIM: Scholarly, yes.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Predictable. You not only know what texts they're going to use, but the type of piece that will be played.

NATHALIE JOACHIM: Exactly. And so there I was, in a Catholic church in the middle of this tiny farming village, surrounded by girls and women. And at the beginning of the mass, the only other musician in the space was a drummer, a gentleman playing like a conga drum. And that also surprised me, because I think of the mass, and I think of organ or strings or things that you won't find in a farming village.

And then this soft drumming started. And then the singing began. And it was so beautiful to just be surrounded by this music that was, in fact, representing a religion that was, as we know, sort of forced on these people, but so connected to the African rhythms that are influenced by our roots, our heritage that were coming through the drums, these patterns that had become so familiar to me in my, at that point, about year-and-a-half of really diving deep into Haitian folkloric music.

And what was so beautiful to me about it was just the notion that, here we were as a people, singing songs in our language, Haitian Creole, in a church and to a god that was not created by us and not designed for us, but so deeply rooted in who we have always been and connected to this sense of spirituality that we have always had.

And in the way that happens when people sing in church, you sort of hear little voices pop out that aren't the most in tune—some overzealous child singing in the third row who just really wants to be heard, an elder at the back who's never really been able to carry a tune so well.

But everyone just really lending their voice to the space wholly and fully and with their entire self, which is how music is really made in Haiti.

And just looking ahead of me at all of these beautiful young girls and how this moment was about them sharing and connecting with one another and having this sense of closeness that is really—that's also what sang to me in that image.

It's just that you don't always get to replicate that kind of intimacy, that kind of closeness. And in that space, in that moment, on that day, we really were all able to engage in that together. And I think for me, it's maybe the most spiritual experience I've ever had.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Your works are kind of surprising for a composer in that you have relinquished control of some things. As you say, the choir is not perfect. You have not rehearsed with them. You don't have control over their intonation, their tuning, what they're singing.

Was that difficult for you as a composer?

NATHALIE JOACHIM: I loved it. I really loved it.

A lot of people do comment on the rhythm. And I think what's very funny is that, of course, the choir was not singing to a metronome. They hadn't rehearsed a million times. It was a regular guy keeping his own time on the drum and the choir keeping their own time as choirs wont to do.

And there is something really beautiful about having to shape, for example, the electronic sounds. I allowed the material to sort of tell me what it leaned towards. And that was so much of the making of the record was listening deeply to what was offered to me.

And I do think of every voice on the record as an offering. And to allow myself to just sort of nestle up to them in different ways. And there's a lot of fun to be had in doing that.

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

ANDREA NELSON: Weems is not just mimicking a past style, a past traditional form of portraiture where often what is as important as the figure, sitting or standing, is all of this highly constructed background, whether it's a backdrop or something along those lines.

But this is much more intimate, in a way. And it creates a very powerful sense of the presence of these three girls. And I think that is something that Weems is taking into consideration.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's impossible to get away from the slice of life feeling of this picture. So what is the resonance of that sort of tradition of both symbolism and Weems's choice to make this feel more laid back?

ANDREA NELSON: This is where another layer of art history comes in. There's another work, and in many ways it's a pendant photograph to *May Flowers*: same size, same circular shape. And in fact, the Gallery owns both of those photographs. And we often install them together.

And that one is called *After Manet*. So Weems is very much, within this series, thinking about the work of Edouard Manet. So this is a French painter of the 19th century who was reworking tradition like Weems is reworking this history of formal portraiture.

Edouard Manet was doing the same thing with pastoral landscapes and images of idealized or mythologized reclined female figures in the landscape.

And he, in what was thought of as an incredibly radical gesture at the time, brought in this image of an everyday woman. And in fact, many people argue that she's a prostitute. She's not this idealized female figure.

And it is that sense of bringing in an everyday person to rework and even challenge these past depictions of history or constructions of history.

So I think Weems is bringing in these young girls who are from perhaps the working class or middle class families from Syracuse. And yes, their clothing, they're dressed in these beautiful

floral dresses. But they're very contemporary, right? They're of the time. Their clothing doesn't look historic.

[RHYTHMIC DRUMMING]

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

NATHALIE JOACHIM: You know, my grandmother comes from an era where when someone took your photograph, it was an occasion because you didn't have a phone in your pocket that was taking pictures every five minutes. It was scheduled and there was an appointment made and a photographer came with loads and loads of equipment just to get one good photo of you.

And there's something about that. There's something that's clearly so heavy and weighted about those portraits when we see them. And I think it's because there was this sense of importance, that it was a real sacrifice to spend all of that money to get just one good photo taken of you.

And my grandmother used to get embarrassed when I would take pictures of her on my cell phone or just in passing. She'd be like, "I'm not ready. I should go do my hair." And I'm like, "No, but I want to remember you just like this."

And so to me, so many of those photos that I have of her are our most beautiful moments that we've shared with one another. And so I love it. I love the idea of catching someone completely at ease, with no airs about them, but simply just capturing the beauty of who they are.

[GENTLE MUSIC]

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

CELESTE HEADLEE: This is a picture that was taken relatively recently. I mean, the picture was taken in 2002. The artwork was printed in 2013. And yet, she calls it *May Flowers Long Forgotten*.

It hasn't been that long. She's chosen to put it in the sepia tones, which make it seem pre-color film, right?

What do you think of this—what she's doing is she plays with our sense of time in this photo?

ANDREA NELSON: She was thinking about how we might forget different parts, different aspects of history: that one may think about May Day as a celebration of spring, that there was once in the past a ritual where young girls would dance around a maypole.

But May Day is really connected to International Workers' Day. That is, it is connected to this socialist movement in history. It is related to protest and particularly labor protests from the 19th century.

But we see threads connecting that to protest into the 20th century, into civil rights protests.

And I think for her, it is for us not to forget this history and how it has been created, written, who has written it.

[UPBEAT MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: As I understand it, you were inspired to take this research trip, to do this research because of your relationship with your grandmother. Is that right?

NATHALIE JOACHIM: Yes. She was amazing. She and I really connected deeply over music. And now I understand why music was so central to her life. Again, this idea that our language and our history is one that has been carried on as an oral tradition for most of its existence.

I tell people all the time that Haitian Creole was not formalized as a written language until the 1970s. So for us, sharing music with one another was our way of carrying history on. It also was a way of telling stories to one another.

And my grandmother really brought me into that practice so early in my life. And losing her voice had me listening to the landscape in Haiti in a very different way when I visited the first time after she was no longer there. It allowed me to open up my ears to realize all of the women's voices around me that you could hear almost all the time in the countryside, doing laundry, taking care of children, cooking, taking care of the house, doing yard work.

There's this sort of constant chorus of women's voices that you hear. And that got me interested in this idea of finding the comfort in women's voices in Haiti.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What did your grandmother's voice sound like?

NATHALIE JOACHIM: You can hear it on the album. She sings with me.

[SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So when you look at this photograph, does the photograph also make you feel a connection to her?

NATHALIE JOACHIM: It does. You know, it's so funny, the way that their hair is done is something, that's the way my grandmother used to do my hair. I'm sure that's the way that she used to have her hair done as a child, too.

And so in a way, I see myself in those little girls, but I also see my grandmother. And in them and in her, I saw a soul that really knew so much more than it had lived, even. I have the sense, especially now that my grandmother is gone, that so much of her lives within me.

And that every day, I'm discovering new pieces of myself that I also saw in her.

And that gives me the sense that somehow we're all sort of born maybe with pieces of life that we're not aware of for some time. And you can often see that in a gaze.

CELESTE HEADLEE: And here, in its entirety, is the third movement from Nathalie Joachim's "Suite pou Dantan."

[GENTLE VIOLIN MUSIC, RHYTHMIC DRUMMING, SINGING IN HAITIAN CREOLE]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Nathalie Joachim for joining us. You can learn more about her and Carrie Mae Weems at our website, nga.gov/podcast.

On our next episode, our season 1 finale, jazz bassist Christian McBride joins us. He'll improvise a response to a Roy DeCarava photograph of a little boy named David.

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie.

You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast.

If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also, leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.